An Automatic Finite-Sample Robustness Metric: Can Dropping a Little Data Make a Big Difference?

Ryan Giordano
MIT

Rachael Meager
LSE

Tamara Broderick
MIT

Job talk 2021

You're a data analyst, and you've

- Gathered some exchangeable data,
- Cleaned up / removed outliers,
- Checked for correct specification, and
- Drawn a conclusion from your statistical analysis
  (e.g., based the sign / significance of some estimated parameter).

Dropping data: Motivation

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Well done!
Would you be concerned if you could **reverse your conclusion** by
removing a **small proportion** (say, 0.1%) of your data?

Consider Angelucci et al. [2015], a randomized controlled trial study of the efficacy of microcredit in Mexico based on 16,560 data points. The variable "Beta" estimates the effect of microcredit in US dollars.

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Question: Is the reported interval $-4.55 \pm (5.88)$ a reasonable description of the uncertainty in the estimated efficacy of microcredit?

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Not always!
...but sometimes, surely yes.
For example, often in economics:

- Small fractions of data are missing not-at-random,
- Policy population is different from analyzed population,
- We report a convenient summary (e.g. mean) of a complex effect,
- Models are stylized proxies of reality.

Estimate the effect of leaving out $\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor$ datapoints, where α is small.

Objective

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Question 1: How do we find influential datapoints?
The number of subsets $\binom{N}{\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor}$ can be very large even when α is very small.
In the MX microcredit study, $\binom{16560}{15} \approx 1.4 \cdot 10^{51}$ sets to check for $\alpha = 0.0009$.
We provide a fast, automatic approximation based on the **influence function**.

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Question 2: What makes an estimator non-robust?

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Non-robustness to removal of $\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor$ points is:

- Not (necessarily) caused by misspecification.
- Not (necessarily) caused by outliers.
- Not captured by standard errors.
- Not mitigated by large N.
- Primarily determined by the **signal to noise** ratio
    ... in a sense which we will define.

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Question 3: When is our approximation accurate?

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- We provide deterministic error bounds for small α.
- We show the accuracy in simple experiments.
- We show the accuracy in a number of real-world experiments.

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Conclusion: Related work and future directions

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The influence function

- Weights as derivatives
- Influence function
- Simulation
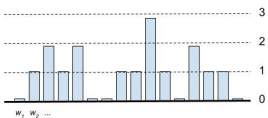- Experiments

The linear approximation.

Original weights:

Leave-one-out weights:

Bootstrap weights:
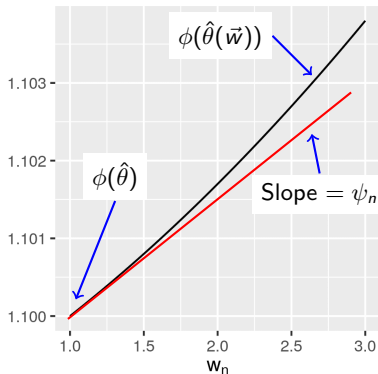
$$\phi(\hat{\theta}(\vec{w})) = \phi(\hat{\theta}) + \sum_{n=1}^{N} \psi_n(\vec{w}_n - 1) + \text{Higher-order derivatives}$$

Key idea: Controlling higher-order derivatives can control the error.
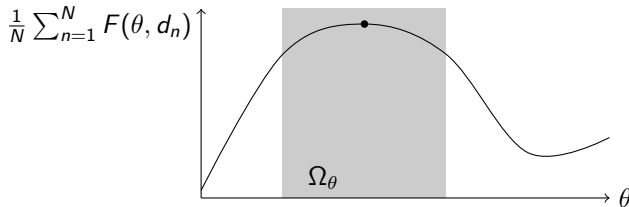
The linear approximation.

Let W_α be the set of weight vectors with no more than $\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor$ zeros.

Let $H(\theta, d_n) := \left. \frac{\partial G(\theta, d_n)}{\partial \theta^T} \right|_\theta$.

Assumption (Smooth Objective)

Fix the dataset. Assume there exists a compact $\Omega_\theta \subseteq \mathbb{R}^D$ with $\hat{\theta}(\vec{w}) \in \Omega_\theta$ for all $\vec{w} \in W_\alpha$. Assume that, for all $\theta \in \Omega_\theta$:

- $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} H(\theta, d_n)$ and $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} G(\theta, d_n)$ are bounded.
- $\frac{1}{N} \sum_{n=1}^{N} H(\theta, d_n)$ is uniformly non-singular and Lipschitz (in θ).
- $\phi(\theta)$ has a Lipschitz first derivative.

The linear approximation.

Theorem

Let Assumption 1 hold for a given dataset. Then there exists a sufficiently small α such that

$$\sup_{\vec{w} \in W_\alpha} \left| \phi^{\text{lin}}(\vec{w}) - \phi(\hat{\theta}(\vec{w})) \right| \leq C_1 \alpha \ \ and \ \ \sup_{\vec{w} \in W_\alpha} \left| \phi(\hat{\theta}(\vec{w})) - \phi(\hat{\theta}) \right| \leq C_2 \sqrt{\alpha},$$

where C_1 and C_2 are given by the quantities in the assumption.

The linear approximation.

Since $\alpha \ll \sqrt{\alpha}$ when α is small, Theorem 1 states that the linear approximation's error is of smaller order than the actual difference.

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Proof sketch.

The second inequality follows from the smoothness of the objective.
The first inequality follows from the smoothness of $d\hat{\theta}(\vec{w})/d\vec{w}$. □

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Proof sketch.

The second inequality follows from the smoothness of the objective. The first inequality follows from the smoothness of $d\hat{\theta}(\vec{w})/d\vec{w}$. $\square$

Corollary

Under standard conditions, Assumption 1 holds for fixed constants with probability approaching one for $N \to \infty$. Then Theorem 1 applies with probability approaching one as $N \to \infty$.

The linear approximation.

For $N = 5,000$ data points, compute the OLS estimator from:

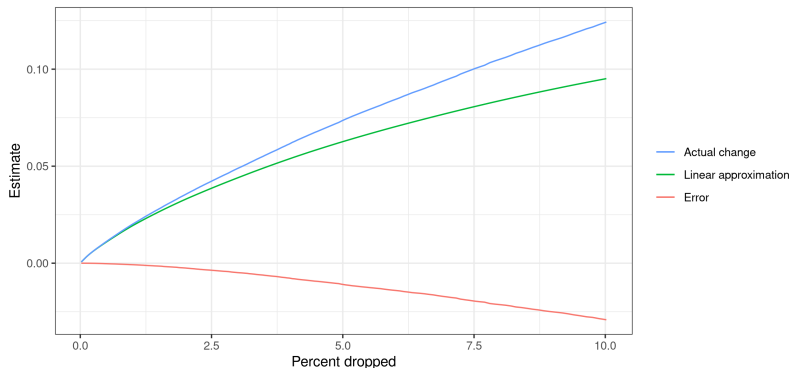| Regressors	Residuals	Responses
$x_n \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_x^2)$	$\varepsilon_n \sim \mathcal{N}(0, \sigma_\varepsilon^2)$	$y_n = \theta_0 x_n + \varepsilon_n$

Figure: The actual change, linear approximation to the change, and approximation error. Here, $\sigma_x = 2$, $\sigma_\varepsilon = 1$, and $\theta_0 = 0.5$.

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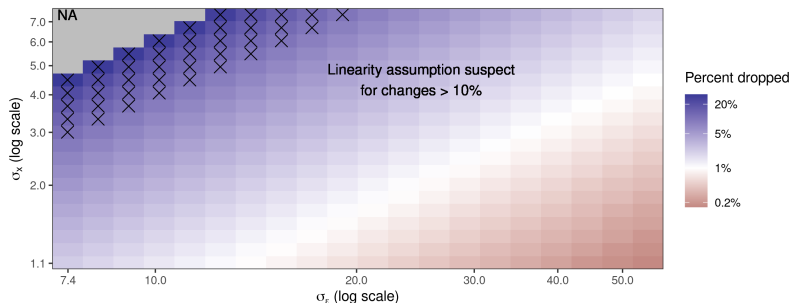| Regressors	Residuals	Responses
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Figure: The approximate perturbation inducing proportion at differing values of σ_x and σ_ε. Red colors indicate datasets whose sign can is predicted to change when dropping less than 1% of datapoints. The grey areas indicate $\hat{\Psi}_\alpha = \text{NA}$, a failure of the linear approximation to locate any way to change the sign.

Cash transfers.

Study case	Original estimate	Target change	Refit estimate	Observations dropped
Poor, period 10	33.861 (4.468)*	Sign change	**-2.559 (3.541)**	697 = 6.63%
		Significance change	**4.806 (3.684)**	435 = 4.14%
		Significant sign change	**-9.416 (3.296)***	986 = 9.37%
Non-poor, period 10	21.493 (9.405)*	Sign change	**-0.573 (6.750)**	30 = 0.70%
		Significance change	**16.262 (8.927)**	3 = 0.07%
		Significant sign change	-10.845 (6.467)	92 = 2.16%

Table: Cash transfers results for the final study period. The "Refit estimate" column shows the result of re-fitting the model removing the Approximate Most Influential Set. Stars indicate significance at the 5% level. Refits that achieved the desired change are bolded.

Conclusions

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- Robustness to removing a $\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor$ datapoints is principally determined by the signal to noise ratio, does not disappear asymptotically, and is distinct from (and typically larger than) standard errors.
- Robustness to removing a $\lfloor \alpha N \rfloor$ datapoints is easy to check! We can quickly and automatically find an approximate influential set which is accurate for small α.

Links and references

Tamara Broderick, Ryan Giordano, Rachael Meager (alphabetical authors)
"An Automatic Finite-Sample Robustness Metric: Can Dropping a Little Data Change Conclusions?"
https://arxiv.org/abs/2011.14999

See the paper for applications to:
  – Hierarchical meta-analysis of microcredit [Meager, 2020]
  – Cash transfers randomized controlled trial [Angelucci and De Giorgi, 2009]
  – Oregon Medicaid experiment [Finkelstein et al., 2012]
  – Expository simulations

zaminfluence: R package with leave-α-out robustness for OLS and IV estimators
https://github.com/rgiordan/zaminfluence

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